

## RECENT BOOKS

### AGENTS AND THEIR AGENCY

**Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948–1967**, by Hillel Cohen, translated by Haim Watzman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. ix + 264 pages. Bibliography to p. 268. Index to p. 281. \$29.95 cloth.

#### *Reviewed by Nimer Sultany*

Scholars have long been puzzled by the acquiescence of the Palestinian Arab minority to Israeli rule after 1948. In order to answer this question they have chosen two main paths of inquiry: either to uncover the policies by which the state has attempted to control its Palestinian minority or to show that their apparent acquiescence is more complicated than is assumed.

In his book *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948–1967*, Hillel Cohen contributes to our understanding of this question and employs both paths of inquiry. Here he continues the project of uncovering the history and dynamics of Palestinian collaboration with Israel. His previous book *Army of Shadows* (University of California Press, 2008) investigated the period prior to 1948; *Good Arabs* focuses on the period of 1948–1967. In both books Cohen uses and exposes invaluable information derived exclusively from Israeli security archives that have been accidentally declassified. The limited nature of these sources of information is quite obvious. Indeed, the archives provide only half of the story. Despite these limitations, Cohen provides a very informative account of the relations between Israeli intelligence agencies and Arab citizens.

The book offers a complex account of collaboration that supplemented the military government imposed on Arab citizens. This account shows that the control system is far from monolithic; indeed, there

were differences of opinion between different agencies on required policies and even competition over agents. More important, it refutes the contention that such control mechanisms were exclusively security driven. Rather, these mechanisms had far-reaching political, social, and ideological goals. Specifically, they aimed at pacifying Arab citizens, shaping their consciousness and identity, delineating their political discourse, and controlling political behavior. Israel's security agencies exploited weaknesses and financial dependence as well as local animosities and ethnic/religious differences within the Arab minority in order to recruit agents, to divide the community, to suppress nationalist sentiments, to co-opt activists, and hence to advance the state's goals.

Cohen further shows that the notion of collaboration itself is very complex given the different backgrounds of collaborators (like politicians, teachers, or criminals); the different purposes of collaboration (inter alia, informers, facilitators of land deals, saboteurs, or armed squads); the multiplicity of rewards given to collaborators (such as positions and jobs, money, erasure of criminal record, pass permits, land leases, gun permits); the diversity of motives among collaborators (power, personal interest, and internalizing Zionist discourse); inconsistent attitudes of community members toward collaborators (hostility, retribution, fear, or asking for their services); and the varying degrees of success and failure of such collaboration to achieve its required results (more in land issues than in shaping identity).

Cohen simultaneously demonstrates two seemingly contradictory phenomena: the extensive reach of intelligence agencies (and their attempt to systemize control through regional committees and the Central Committee on Arab Affairs) and the frequently successful resistance to collaboration and to the myriad of control mechanisms. Aiding infiltration of displaced persons, building illegally, and maintaining Arab identity are examples of successful Arab resistance to Israel's attempts to control the minority. Control and resistance seem to be inextricably linked in this narrative.

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Cohen challenges the sweeping reductionist generalizations describing the Arab generation during the first two decades as significantly more acquiescent than later generations of Arab citizens. Additionally, this failure to achieve the required outcomes, the existence of large numbers of collaborators notwithstanding, demonstrates that the security apparatus's power was ultimately limited.

This book confirms what Arab citizens have experienced as an objective reality during the first decades of Israel's existence (and in many ways continue to experience it as such). It recaptures and represents, even if partially, their reality under Israeli rule. Cohen's account is generally accurate despite minor factual mistakes, such as describing *al-Ittibad* as a daily newspaper (p. 45) during the decades discussed in the book, when in fact it became one only in 1983.

The main weakness of the book, however, seems to be the framing. In his *Army of Shadows*, Cohen framed the struggle over Palestine as a conflict between two nationalisms. The phrase "ethnic cleansing" does not feature in that framing. Likewise, in *Good Arabs* Cohen claims that it is the Arabs who "instigated" the war against Israel, which "created an atmosphere of enmity and mistrust between the state and its Arab citizens" (p. 2). At different points of the narrative Cohen makes clear to the reader that Israel's policies and actions are in some ways understandable as they are "typical" (p. 233) of these situations of conflict. It is also surprising that Cohen, despite much of the information he himself provides regarding the oppressive measures of the military government, could conclude that one reason that Arabs collaborated with Israel was because "the very structure of the state was attractive" (p. 235).

It is unclear how people living under the demeaning conditions of military governance (which deprived them of protection from state abuse and oppression) in the aftermath of a massive transformation of their homeland, and the displacement of their people, can be attracted to the "democratic ethos" proclaimed by the new state and the "positive aspects" of Zionism (pp. 235–36). Hence it seems that the author conflates rationalization with motivation: rationalizations for accepting new realities

are one thing and motivations for accepting it are quite another. Indeed, readers know of the phenomenon of collaboration even under dictatorships.

It seems to me that these issues are a symptom of the author's underlying (and problematic) notion of human agency. The author claims that collaborators were not always mere passive tools or "pawns" or "regime's tails" (pp. 37, 212) but also active agents who at times "wagged state institutions" (p. 37). He further argues that identification with the state has, at times, resulted from "their own independent thinking" (p. 229). This approach seems to treat individuals as free, self-governing, autonomous agents who are unencumbered by the realities of oppression.

However, it does not follow from the recognition of the limits of power that people living under oppressive circumstances can significantly affect their conditions. That is why scholars use the phrase "power relations": Had the oppressed been annihilated these relations of power would have ceased to exist. Indeed, one can always claim that individuals or groups have a sense of agency and mastery over their fate. In light of different relations of power, one should be careful to distinguish between different conceptions of agency. The range of choices and hence the capacity to freely choose and act upon these choices is more limited in some contexts than in others. The failure to make distinctions makes the invocation of the concept of agency analytically unenlightening, descriptively uninformative, and normatively problematic. Cohen's underlying conception of collaborators' agency is thus dubious as it underestimates the influence of the very reality that he himself meticulously portrays. This conception miraculously transforms "agents" of the security apparatus to "independent agents" or "agents" of their people.

Despite these weaknesses, Cohen's book is an excellent addition to current research on Israeli policies and their impact on Palestinian citizens of the state in its formative years. It provides new archival material about the less visible aspects of the relationship between the state and its Arab citizens. Such historical evidence is indispensable to scholarly attempts to understand current predicaments.